

ELEGY

*Adapted by James D. Houston
from his book The Men in My Life*

At the county dump I am throwing away my father.
His old paint rags, and stumps of brushes. Color charts.
The spattered leather suitcase he used for so many years
to carry the small tools and tiny jars of his trade, a
suitcase so cracked and bent and buckle-ripped it's no
good for anything now. I start to toss it on top of the
brushes and rags, but hold back.

I toss instead the five-gallon drums that once held
primer. He stacked them against one wall of his shop,
for no good reason, kept dozens more than he would ever
use. Around these I toss the bottles and tubes from his
medicine chest. And cracked boots, filled with dust, as
if in his closet it has been raining dust for years. And
magazines. His fishing hat. Notes to himself:

Fix Window

Grease car

Call Harlow about job.

Bent nails in a jar, rolls of old wire, pipe sections,
a fiddle he always intended to mend, old paid bills, check
stubs, pencils his teeth chewed. Ragtag bits of this and
that he had touched, stacked, stored. Useless to anyone
but him, and he's gone now.

So I toss it all out there among the refrigerators and lettuce leaves, truck tires, busted sofas, and flowerpots. Onto that heap I throw my father, saving for the last that suitcase of his I'd first seen twenty years back—and it was old then—that day he took me out on a job for the first time, wearing a pair of his spattered overalls, rolled thick at the cuff, and a Sherwin-Williams white billcap.

"What're ya gonna do, Dad?" I say that first morning.

He doesn't answer. He never answers, as if he prefers silence. And I always wait, as if each silence is an exception, and this time he will turn and speak. It's my big reason for coming along this morning, the chance that out here on the job something might pass between us. I would never have been able to describe it ahead of time, but . . . maybe . . . something.

I wait and watch. Two minutes of puckering lips and long, slow blinks while he studies the labels, then he selects one tube, unscrews its top, and squeezes out a little on his fingertips.

I follow him to the five-gallon drum he's mixing paint in. A short stick of plywood holds the color he's shooting for—pale, pale green. He's proud of his eye for color, his knack for figuring just how pale this green will be when it dries. I watch and learn. Squeeze a green strip from the tube and stir it in, wide easy stirs while the green spirals out. Stir and stir. Then test: dip another stick in. Check the color. Stir.

"Okay, Jim. Take half this green paint and get that wall there covered."

He hands me a clean brush. Its black bristles shine with yesterday's thinner. He pours a gallon bucket full of paint for me and cuts the fall off clean.

"I'll be back in a minute," he says.

It's the first time I've painted anything away from home. I do not yet know that before summer is out I will dread the look of any long unpainted wall and wince at the smell of paint and thinner. But now I want this one to be a good job. I want to live up to the paint my dad has just mixed. I start by the living room door, taking my time, keeping the molding clear for a white trim later.

Ten minutes pass, and this first wall becomes my world. I am moving across the wide-open country—working my brush like Dad told me to, using the wrist, lapping strokes over—when I feel the need to turn around.

In the far doorway, the lady of the house stands glaring at me with a look of shock and anger. Next to the wall of her priceless living room she finds a kid dressed up in his father's overalls with the cuffs rolled thick. I realize how dangerous I look to her. Under my new green freckles my face turns scarlet.

The woman is gone.

From the hallway I hear her loud whisper. "Mr. Houston! That boy painting my living room couldn't be over fifteen!"

"He's thirteen, Ma'am."

"He's what?"

"It's my boy, Jim. He's giving me a hand this summer."

"I just wonder if he knows what he's doing in there."

"I painted my first house when I was ten."

"Well . . . I . . . if . . . I'd certainly be keeping an eye on him if I were you."

"Don't worry, Ma'am, he knows what to do."

Behind me I hear her walking slowly across the room. I keep painting; I don't look at her this time. Put plenty of paint on the brush. But don't let it run. Feather it at the overlap. Cover. Cover.

Dad comes in and fills up another gallon bucket and helps me finish the wall. He catches my eye once and winks. Then we are painting toward each other in a silence broken only by the wish of bristles and the cluck of brush handle against the can. Somewhere in the back of the house a radio is playing its faraway music.

We finish the room by quitting time. Dad looks over my work, finds a couple of bald spots along the baseboard, and has me fill these in, saying only, "Keep an eye out for them holidays." We clean the brushes. He drops the lid shut on his kit of a suitcase, snaps the buckle to, straps it, and says, "Might as well take that on out to the truck."

I had never paid much attention to his kit. Now I know just enough about what's inside for it to be mysteri-

ous. A year from now I will know too much about what's inside. By then I will be able to read his half smile, his apology for having only this to offer me. But today carrying it is an honor. No one has ever carried that kit but him. It has a manly weight, a fine weight for carrying from the house to the curb, for hoisting onto the truck bed. It lands with a *thunk* and sits solid.

I wait for Dad to tie his ladder on the overhead rack, and we climb into the cab. He winks once more as we prepare to leave Mrs. So-and-so behind. Reeking of paint and turpentine, we are Sherwin and Williams calling it a day, with no way to talk much over the rattle of his metal-floored Chevy, and no need to talk. The clutch leaps. Wind rushes in, mixing paint and gasoline fumes, and all you need to do is to stay loose for the jolts and the whole long rumble ride home.

At the county dump, I am throwing away my father, lifting his old suitcase to toss the last of him onto the smoking heap. It is crusted with splats of seventy colors now, its lid corners split as if somebody sat on it. The ragged straps dangle. One shred of leather holds the chromium buckle that still catches the sun where the paint doesn't cover it. The shred of leather gives. The buckle breaks. The kit flies open.

As if compressed inside, waiting to escape, the smell of oil and pigment cuts through the smoke and rot that fills the air around me. My throwing arm stays. My other hand reaches out. I'm holding the suitcase, inhal-

ing the smell that always clung to him, even after he had scrubbed. It rose from the creases in his hands, from the white liners rimming his fingernails, from the paint specks he sometimes missed with the thinner at the corners of his eyes. I breath it in deep.

I close the suitcase slowly, prepare to heave it once and for all. This time with both hands, out and up. Out among all those things you find only by losing them.

One last glance. By five tonight this, too, will be gone for good, when the bulldozer comes to shove it over the side with the rest of today's collection—treasures of yesterday, old necessities, parts of the heart.